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New York

THEATRE CRITICS'

Reviews

1943

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THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

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NEW YORK SUN	NEW YORK TIMES
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NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE	NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"	NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN

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"Harriet"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
March 4, 1943

An Acting Triumph

By HOWARD BARNES

HELEN HAYES brings her consummate artistry to a new historical portrait in "Harriet." Her characterization of the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is luminous and understanding. Her control of a rambling and rather windy drama is always serenely assured. Her craft is not matched by a great deal of the material in the new Henry Miller's Theater offering, but the sheer beauty, gaiety and intensity of her acting makes it a singularly absorbing entertainment.

* * *

Only the very great figures of the theater can effect this minor miracle of showmanship. Harriet Beecher Stowe was not a particularly arresting or dramatic woman to start with. Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements have been painstaking in their research work, but they have not succeeded in giving their play the striking contours of fine biographical drama. Many of the speeches are downright dull and the conflicts of characters from the 1830's to 1863 are scarcely inspired. What matters is that the authors have realized the touches of greatness and the purely personal foibles of their central character and Miss Hayes is there at every hand to give them vitality and meaning.

* * *

From her marriage to a widower in 1836, with members of the fabulous Beecher clan around her, to the final scene after she returns from seeing her desperately wounded son and President Lincoln, the woman and the famous author are beautifully balanced in the star's performance. One even has glimpses of literary composition in the process as the hardworking and devoted wife and mother becomes the greatest of abolitionists in writing of Uncle Tom, Simon Legree, Topsy and Eva. The action strikes a tragic key in the final act as Mrs. Stowe realizes her individual responsibility for the Civil War, but Miss Hayes moves from one mood to another unfalteringly.

* * *

She is fortunate in her supporting players. Rhys Williams gives a brilliant portrayal of Harriet's absent-minded and scholarly husband. Sydney Smith is excellent as the thundering Henry Ward Beecher, and Jane Seymour is fine as Catherine, who is always chiding the heroine for her levity. They and such other assistants as Seth Arnold, Betty and Lenore Wade, Joan Tetzel, Jack Manning and William Woodson give the piece the human quality and range of dramatic effect which is too often missing in the writing and construction. Elia Kazan's staging is good, principally because it allows Miss Hayes full command of the proceedings, and Gilbert Miller has produced the work sumptuously. In "Harriet" a great actress has brought a famous figure to life. The play's defects can be overlooked. Miss Hayes is Harriet, as surely as she was Victoria.

NEW YORK SUN
March 4, 1943

Helen Hayes Returns In New Play, 'Harriet,' Presented at Henry Miller's

By WARD MOREHOUSE

THEY'VE now given Helen Hayes, in the play called "Harriet," the best stage material—yes, the best role—she has had since "Victoria Regina." To an episodic, leisurely and loosely written piece Miss Hayes, appearing as Harriet Beecher Stowe, contributes a truly distinguished performance.

"Harriet," fashioned by Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements, pictures twenty-seven years in the life of Mrs. Stowe and nineteenth century America. Handsomely mounted, it was presented last evening by Gilbert Miller in the playhouse his father built. Because of the playing of Miss Hayes in the role of the idealist, pacifist and abolitionist, "Harriet" takes its place as one of the few important productions of this strange theatrical season.

Wearing bonnets, shawls, silks and crinolines, Miss Hayes gives a performance of warmth, humor and clarity. She makes you forgive many script deficiencies by the sheer magic of her playing. You always have the feeling that here is a role that she feels, enjoys and certainly sustains.

Playwrights Ryerson and Clements present glimpses of the home life and career years of this daughter of the crusading Beecher clan, this little woman who shook a nation with the devastating power of her "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and thus helped to change the course of American history.

You meet Mrs. Stowe first in 1836, in her cottage in the river town of Cincinnati, a booming mudhole on the border of slave-trading Kentucky. Daughter of a sonorous and high-purpose evangelist, she has become the bride of the puttering and scholarly Calvin Stowe. You see her later as the mother of a distracting brood and as author of her angry and challenging anti-slavery novel, a best seller around the world. And you see finally in the plush comfort of the Stowe mansion at Andover, Mass., in 1863—and just after she has returned from a visit to Washington, where President Lincoln received her as the little woman who started a terrible war.

Whatever analogies "Harriet" draws between the Sixties and present times; whatever parallels it seeks to present, its principal service lies in the fact that it provides Helen Hayes with a part that is close to her heart. For that I will try to forget some cumbersome scenes, many rambling and static moments.

Many of the parts in "Harriet" are sketchily written. Others, however, give the players a chance. Rhys Williams comes forth with a grand performance as the gentle, devoted and absent-minded husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Jane Seymour gave a sharp and effective portrayal of Harriet's spinister sister. Seth Arnold is amusing as a Cincinnati villager of the 1830s and Robert Harrison provides a thundering Dr. Lyman Beecher. As the evening wore on I got quite a sufficiency of several characters, including the twins, Hatty and Eliza. Elia Kazan, a director in demand these days, has undoubtedly contributed vitality to the three acts and eight scenes of this Ryerson-Clements play.

Miss Hayes, who has a river place of her own in the slave-free Rockland county, year of 1943, is now back for the first time since "Candle in the Wind." And those who attended last evening's performance at Henry Miller's gave her a resounding welcome. When they walked out into the snows of 43d street at 11 P. M. they were fully aware that they had seen a great actress at work.

NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN
March 4, 1943

Helen Hayes Stars in Biography of Author of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'

By JOHN ANDERSON

NOT since "Victoria Regina" has Helen Hayes had such a character to play, and a play to play it in as she has in "Harriet," which Gilbert Miller brought last night to Henry Miller's Theatre. It is a dramatic biography of that other lady earth-shaker of the 19th Century, Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who tossed off a novel as if it were no more than a hand grenade, which, in fact, it was.

Though there is bound to be historical significance in any play about the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements give us chiefly a personal study, informal, human and often highly amusing as family comedy. Miss Hayes, by the striking and vivid force of her performance, makes "Harriet" momentous and fascinating, one of the few plays in a poverty-stricken season to touch real value.

This is no attempt to give a full length portrait of the little woman who, in Lincoln's phrase "started such a big war." The authors are concerned more with her attitude to the events which she finally did so much to shape. They contrast her amusingly with the other Beechers—the stern, old Testament, God-walloping preachers of hellfire and damnation, and they suggest that in her political ideas Harriet began as an escapist, turned into an appeaser, and finally found that there can be no compromise over liberty.

Shaped by Events

If she shaped the events, she was also shaped by them. She thought that slavery was ugly but none of her business; she believed that for every Southern slave-holder there were 10 Northern mill owners opposing abolition because it would hurt their profits, and she wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin," so the playwrights say, in the hope that it would bring peace—not the sword. It was only when she talked to Lincoln that she learned the true proportions of the struggle, and saw it as part of a fight for freedom to release—some day, somehow—all men, white and black, from bondage of all sorts, political and economic.

Even against the handicap of a foregone conclusion, the authors are able to create not only an absorbing character but a dramatic interest in her development. They show her with the wonderful and incredible Beechers (who apparently found God in their vocal chords) and they show her with her fatuous but somehow beguiling husband. They show her with her children, frightened by the border State riots, and they focus especially on the turning point in her mind, a poignant scene, when abolition is dumped in her front parlour in the person of an agonized Negro tracked down by some property-worshipping Yankees.

Lively Portrait

They have drawn a lively portrait for their episodic chronicle, not New England enough emotionally or intellectually, of a lady who was regarded by her own family as frivolous but who outshone them all in a family of exhibitionists. If the authors' emphasis now and then suggests the genial theatre pride of the "success story" the character rescues herself by the simplicity and honesty of her own spirit. There are uneven stretches, and the final scene seems somewhat forced, but the character sustains the interest throughout.

This mouse-into-lion tale lends itself perfectly to the sort of humorous playing, at once outwardly demure and inwardly robust, that is Miss Hayes' special stage province. It is the little hand in the mailed fist, the frail body and the iron mind, the Victorian Gothic triumphant. Here, in beaming comedy, is proof that the hand that rules the cradle rocks the world.

Rescued from the claptrap of her recent plays Miss Hayes gratefully accepts the character of Mrs. Stowe for every inflection there is in it, every tone of gaiety, every hint of strength, every solemn assurance of humanity without snobbish righteousness. The authors have been smart in contrasting her with the unbeading Beechers, and Miss Hayes takes every advantage of the comparison, extends it, develops it in subtle ways of her own, with the sort of sly wisdom and gentle strength she showed so long ago in "What Every Woman Knows." With all the surrounding authority of history she goes even beyond the play to embody in theatrical terms a woman whose portrait justifies the enlargement.

Excellent Cast

Mr. Miller has assembled an excellent cast and Elia Kazan has directed with an astute perception of the script's needs, but with evident scruples. As the Mr. Stowe, who became famous as Harriet Beecher's husband, Rhys Williams presents with rare discretion and tactful humor, a portrait which, in less capable hands, might have descended to the banality of foolish caricature. Jane Seymour is superb in the thankless part of the spinsterish Catherine, and Sydney Smith suggests admirably all the spell-binding powers of Henry Ward Beecher, with all the strength and weaknesses of a mid-Victorian pulpiteer.

Even sketchy acknowledgments to a long and excellent cast should include specifically Robert Harrison, Joan Tetzel, Seth Arnold and Betty and Lenore Wade, real twins, who by one of the theatre's miracles, play Mrs. Stowe's twin daughters. Lemuel Ayers' settings evoke without the easy over-emphasis of most Victorian sets, a living sense of the period and Mrs. Bernstein's costumes have both the beauty of costumes and the look of wearable clothes.

While I saw all this in Washington more than a week ago, no sensible playgoer, I think, in right mind or town, will miss it.

"Harriet"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
March 4, 1943

Miss Hayes As Mrs. Stowe

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE "little woman who made a great war" has made nothing much more, I fear, than a rather harmless play. Harriet Beecher Stowe, even as played by Helen Hayes, does not emerge as a very vibrant or compelling character; and her story, except for its one tremendous chapter, has little drive or drama. The authors of *Harriet* are well aware of this. Despite some scattered effort to sound the trumpet note, Miss Ryerson and Mr. Clements have fallen back, in the main, on domestic comedy and period manners. They have scamped the crusader in Mrs. Stowe for the patient wife of an absent-minded professor, the dumpy sister of the multitudinous Beechers, the tender mother and the struggling housewife.

* * *

As such, *Harriet* has its amusing moments and agreeable episodes, and Miss Hayes' admirers will be rewarded for their loyalty with something like half a loaf. For the rest of us, however, *Harriet* must seem far oftener draggy than diverting, and a little tenuous even when it diverts. The play's best possibilities really lie, not in Harriet herself, but in the whole Beecher tribe—the imperious Lyman, the opinionated Catherine, the theatrical Henry, and so on. But beyond handling the family—in Act I—with a kind of comic-strip liveliness, *Harriet* does very little with them. The celebrated Henry Ward, in particular, is botched: his hamminess is burlesqued much too broadly.

The authors have, in fact, gone in for the most obvious type of fun: shown Harriet's husband being just too cute in his absent-mindedness; pictured Harriet trying to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the household in an uproar; had the cook threaten to leave because Miss Catherine is messing around in the kitchen; and thrown in period jokes like "You shouldn't play rough games like croquet." At best this kind of fun is mild, and at worst it is musty.

The more serious scenes—the capture of a fugitive slave in the Stowe parlor, or Harriet's big speech, at the end, to her townspeople—are hardly well contrived in themselves, and even less effective for being inserted so loosely into the play. Harriet's abolitionist side is but dutifully treated at best, while her romantic and religious side is almost completely ignored. She emerges as vaguely "womanly" but hardly a woman.

* * *

Miss Hayes offers a skilful and sympathetic performance, now brisk, now humorous, now forceful; but it is no more than a performance, since Harriet is no more than a "part." Mr. Kazan's direction is excellent in its detail, but the play is much too talky and drifting for him really to pull it together. There are good performances by Rhys Williams as Calvin Stowe and Jane Seymour as Catherine, and there is an anything but good one by Sydney Smith as Henry. Most of the minor parts are agreeably played, and the sets and costumes are well-chosen.

'HARRIET'

Play by Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements; staged by Elia Kazan; settings by Lemuel Ayers; costumes by Aline Bernstein; presented by Gilbert Miller at Henry Miller's Theater Wednesday, March 3, 1943. The cast:

Auntie Zeb	Alberta Perkins
Henry Ward Beecher	Sydney Smith
Catharine Beecher	Jane Seymour
Harriet Beecher Stowe	Helen Hayes
Calvin Stowe	Rhys Williams
William Beecher	Guy Sorel
Edward Beecher	Geoffrey Lumb
Mary Beecher Perkins	Carmen Mathews
Charles Beecher	Hugh Franklin
Thomas Beecher	Gaylord Mason
Isabella Beecher	Harda Klaveness
James Beecher	Ronald Reiss
Dr. Lyman Beecher	Robert Harrison
Mr. Tuttle	Harrison Dowd
Mr. Wycherly	Victor Franz
Celestine	Mildred Taswell
Freddie Stowe (as a child)	Edmond Abel
Mrs. Hobbs	Helen Carew
Freddie Stowe (as a young man)	Jack Manning
Georgie Stowe	Joan Tetzel
Hatty Stowe	Betty Wade
Eliza Stowe	Lenore Wade
Jerusha Pantry	Seth Arnold
Lowell Denton	William Woodson
Sukey	Edna Thomas
Haley	Benedict MacQuarrie
Jane	Philippa Bevans

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
March 4, 1943

Helen Hayes the Little Lady Who Makes a Pleasant Play

"Harriet," drama in three acts by Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements. Produced by Gilbert Miller at Henry Miller's Theatre, New York, March 3, 1943

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

MORE people than usual are this morning indebted to Helen Hayes for a pleasant evening in Henry Miller's Theatre last night. They include Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements, her husband, who wrote the play, "Harriet"; Gilbert Miller, who produced it, and enough Beechers and Stowes to crowd a bus.

Also a large company of actors, and an audience that was well pleased with itself and its favorite actress. It held its seats after curtain fall to shower eight or ten curtain calls on her, for which she graciously spoke her thanks.

This, as you know, is not a new experience for Miss Hayes. She did the same thing last season for Maxwell Anderson and the "Candle in the Wind" associates. And the year before that for her husband Charles McArthur, and his "Ladies and Gentlemen."

I suspect, however, that she is a little better pleased with her last evening's job than she was on those former occasions. The story of Harriet Beecher Stowe, which is indubitably a vehicle prepared for the display of her gentler gifts as an actress is sympathetically written and pointed with several of those spendidly human scenes which she plays so simply and so movingly.

Happy Harriet

The long-noted author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"—"the little lady who made a great war," Lincoln called her—is here shown as a fluttering little home body who "scribbled" short stories, and grew up with a family of slightly stuffy individualists without ever coming to reflect their smugness or their more trying self-satisfaction.

Whether these sweeter and more lovable reflections of character were a gift of God, or are a present from the current authors, only the Beecher descendants know for sure.

In the play she is the daughter of a booming Rev. Lyman Beecher, preacher of the simpler gospel of heaven and hellfire, and the sister of Brooklyn's somewhat spectacular Henry Ward Beecher, who auctioned pretty colored slave girls in his pulpit to raise money to buy their freedom. She is married to a theological pedant who couldn't have told whether he was coming or going with the help of a compass.

I have a feeling that the authors, or it may have been their advisers, are a little less than fair to the Beechers. But we'll probably hear more about this later.

Big Job

Harriet bears Calvin Stowe six children, loves them dearly, favors them pridefully, and still finds time for her scribbling. But it is not until she has moved about a good deal, fought her way through many an abolitionist argument and been a painful witness to the cruelties of the slave trade, that she is moved to undertake the writing of "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

With the amazing success of that work, first as a serial and then as a novel, she achieves her maturity, takes on something of the Beecher confidence and is prepared to make eloquent speeches for any one of the four freedoms at the dropping of a cue.

Through these various expressions of Mrs. Stowe's character Miss Hayes is steadily appealing, frequently moving and always persuasively in earnest. She has added dignity and stature to her characterizations in her middle years, and the present-day unrest gives her the force and confidence of a true crusader.

The Hayes support is good, the husband Calvin being especially well realized by Rhys Williams, a Welshman with a true feeling for character. Sydney Smith is not too kind to brother Henry, which is no fault of his, and he plays the pulpit hero well.

Jane Seymour is a stalwart champion of woman's rights as Catherine Beecher; William Woodson is nicely forceful as the young soldier who woos the Stowe twins, and the girls are attractively played and pictured by Betty and Lenore Wade and Joan Tetzel.

The settings, by Lemuel Ayers are a distinct help. So are Aline Bernstein's costumes, and Elia Kazan's direction is no more conventional than the script demands.

NEW YORK TIMES
March 4, 1943

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Harriet"

By LEWIS NICHOLS

HELEN HAYES has brought to the theatre another beautiful portrait, not of a queen this time, like Victoria or Mary, but of a little lady who, in the words of Lincoln, started the great big war—Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." It is a portrait that ranks with the best of Miss Hayes's beribboned gallery, and because of it "Harriet" glows with a warmth that is as rare as it is welcome; because of it, also, it makes an evening at Henry Miller's Theatre one of the best evenings on Broadway.

Miss Hayes gives no metallic picture of a crusading spirit, which would have been possible, nor, at the other extreme, does she stress the side of Mrs. Stowe which in later years led her to say the Lord, rather than herself, had written the famous book. Rather she makes of her an average, generous-minded woman who takes care of a forgetful husband, raises a family, is moved by the horrors of slavery, writes her book and then, like every other mother in America, sees her son go off to the war.

It is a superb picture. As the play opens, Harriet Beecher has just been married to Professor Stowe, and his introduction to the family suggests that Miss Hayes joins Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements, who wrote the play, in the widely held and once expressed idea of a world composed of saints, sinners and Beechers. For the family also is a theme that runs throughout the play, and as its youngest adopted member Miss Hayes obviously regards it with friendly pride and a nice eye for its unusual character.

From Cincinnati, where they first live, the Stowes move to Maine, and it is there Mrs. Stowe writes "Uncle Tom's Cabin," one scene, showing Miss Hayes at work in a melee of children, Beechers, servants and Christmas tree decorations, being magnificent. Afterward came wealth from the book, a mansion at Andover, Mass., and a visit to Lincoln and the wounded son of the Stowes. The play ends with Mrs. Stowe addressing the neighbors, giving them a message on happiness over tyranny, a message, incidentally, that has thoughts also suitable for today.

* * *

"Harriet" has an excellent production and a cast worthy even of Miss Hayes. Rhys Williams plays Professor Stowe, the forgetful, careless, vague scholar, and as he builds up the character, it becomes quite clear why any lady would want to marry him. Sydney Smith is Henry Ward Beecher, and must play the least-happily written part, since obviously the Clementses did not care for the sage of Brooklyn. Others who have important roles as Beechers or saints and sinners are Jane Seymour, Robert Harrison, Helen Carew, Joan Tetzel and Seth Arnold. Elia Kazan directed and Lemuel Ayers contributed the settings.

It is good to have Miss Hayes back, in a play that by itself might not rank as a masterpiece, but which allows her to give a portrait that is.